

Defending the Dead, Confronting the Archive: A Conversation with M. NourbeSe Philip

Patricia Saunders

Law and poetry both share an inexorable concern with language—the “right” use of the “right” words, phrases or even marks of punctuation; precision of expression is the goal shared by both. In the case of the former, this concern has both material and non-material outcomes. A proper interpretation of legislation can result in an individual’s physical freedom, confirmation of civil or human rights, or even death. In *Gregson v. Gilbert* the material and non-material would come together in unexpected ways. An accurate interpretation of the contract of insurance, according to the owners of the *Zong*, that is, would result in great financial benefit to them: they would be paid for murdering 150 Africans. At the same time, it would mean that the deliberate drowning of 150 people was not murder, but merely the disposition of property in a time of emergency to ensure the preservation of the rest of the “cargo”—a reasonable interpretation at that time given the law governing contracts of insurance.

—M. NourbeSe Philip, “Notanda,” *Zong!*

Two years ago I interviewed NourbeSe for the *Journal of West Indian Literature*, and at that time she was working on completing another collection of poetry entitled *Zong!*¹ As good fortune would have it, “Archaeologies of Black Memory,” the symposium and seminar hosted by *Small Axe* and the Caribbean Literary Studies Program at the University of Miami (June 2007), provided a most opportune occasion for me to continue the conversation with NourbeSe

1. Patricia Saunders, “Trying Tongues, E-raced Identities, and the Possibilities of Be/longing: Conversations with NourbeSe Philip,” in “Rooting and Routing Caribbean-Canadian Writing,” special issue, *Journal of West Indian Literature* 14, nos. 1–2 (November 2005): 202–19. M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).

about *Zong!* But more important, the symposium provided all those present with an immanent historical and political context for thinking about this collection of poetry in relation to a larger body of work engaged in critical examinations of the archive as a site, reservoir, or instance capable (when pressed into service by scholars) of producing knowledge about African diaspora subjects and subjectivity. While the symposium was an occasion for further thought and dialogue on this issue, to be sure these questions had been raised in a myriad of ways prior. One need only look to Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* and, more recently, *Lose Your Mother*, or Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts*, to appreciate the extent to which writers and scholars have been preoccupied with this line of critical inquiry.² *Zong!* shares affinities—careful deliberation as a foundational element, for one—with these and other works, but what is all the more promising is the extent to which their creative critical voices and questions are reconfiguring (in a fundamental sense) the form and language in which these critical deliberations are presented to the reading public.

One of the most striking aspects of NourbeSe's writing is her singularity of focus on the power of language and its role in shaping identity and subjectivity, particularly for black people living in the African diaspora. Language and authority are persistent themes throughout her collections of poetry, essays, fiction, and drama.³ But in each instance, her writing draws the reading audience into another sphere of understanding and interpretation, whether it is through her manipulation of form, or the deployment of scientific discourses, Greek mythology, the imagination of young children, or the loud brashness of the notorious *jamettes* of Port of Spain. However, her contributions to African diaspora literatures have to be read and critiqued as part of an impressive body of writing by Caribbean Canadian writers. While her work is certainly rooted in the Caribbean, her critiques of art, culture, and politics are informed by a broader sense of a Caribbean diaspora, particularly in Canada. Up until my encounter with *Zong!* I believed that *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* was the most singular manifestation of this critical approach of all of her works. *Zong!*, however, extends the poet's engagement with language, law, oppression, and memory by situating itself on the high seas during the Middle Passage, to consider, or rather to remember, the enslaved Africans who were first thrown overboard, and then sentenced to a two-page document of

2. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), and *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007); and Fred D'Aguiar, *Feeding the Ghosts* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1997).

3. See *Coups and Calypsos* (Toronto: Mercury Press, 2001); *A Genealogy of Resistance and Other Essays* (Toronto: Mercury Press, 1997); *Caribana: African Roots and Continuities; Race, Space and the Poetics of Moving* (Toronto: Pouli Publications, 1996); *Showing Grit: Showboating North of the 44th Parallel* (Toronto: Pouli Publications, 1993); *Frontiers: Essays and Writings in Racism and Culture* (Stratford: Mercury Press, 1993); *Looking For Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence* (Stratford: Mercury Press, 1991); *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (Charlottetown: Ragweed Press, 1988); and *Harriet's Daughter* (London: Heinemann, 1988).

the account of their watery demise at the hands of slavers concerned only about the insurance money they might receive for their “cargo.” *Zong!* is, in many ways, a measured re-collection of the souls lost at sea, an effort to create a space that might allow them (the 150 unnamed human beings) to finally have their say. But what is the language that would give voice to this kind of agony? What words can describe their experiences? The task, it seems, is one of doing what NourbeSe and many others engaged in confronting the archive have called “telling the story that cannot be told.”

The Interview: Toronto, October 2007

Patricia Saunders: Thank you for taking the time and giving me the opportunity to talk with you and to celebrate the life and release of *Zong!* When we met two years ago to talk about Caribbean Canadian writing for the *Journal of West Indian Literature*, you were in the early stages of working on this project. I posed a question to you then: “Where is your writing taking you next, and what can we expect in the next phase of this dialogue about language, silence, identity, and belonging?”⁴ And I want to quote your exact response in order for us to come back to the point you made then; I’d like to ask you to reflect on this comment again, at the end of this project, two years later. You responded, saying:

I want to say I don’t know, because not knowing is such a frustratingly fruitful place to be as a writer because it always entails discovery. I am presently working on a manuscript of poetry about an incident in the 18th century involving the slave ship, *Zong*. On its way to Jamaica the captain drowned some one hundred and fifty slaves to ensure that the owners of the ship could collect insurance monies, which would not have been possible if the enslaved Africans had succumbed to illness as some already had. I am using the legal text of the court case that arose from that to fashion poetry. I have locked myself in the text in the hope of discovering something that remains hidden below the surface of the legal document. I am excited by it—it’s a very different way of working. And I am rewarded by the fact that although I have imposed the limitation of the text on myself, I have been able to find a lot of freedom within those limitations. I believe that this is a lesson poetry offers us—freedom within limitation—that is especially poignant in this post 9/11 world.⁵

Having completed *Zong!*, what have you learned on this journey—about yourself, your writing, this project? How have you realized this “freedom” within the limitations you imposed on yourself and what have both the limitations and the freedom taught you, ultimately?

M. NourbeSe Philip: My background is in economics and political science and then I went to law school, and as I understood it at that time, the reason I studied law was because I was

4. Saunders, “Trying Tongues,” 218.

5. Ibid.

separated, had a young child, and I thought I needed to have a profession so that I could support my child. Then, some years later, I remembered that my father had wanted to study law; that was an insight for me and I believed I was fulfilling his dream. He never did—study law, that is—for a number of different reasons: children, perhaps money, and those kinds of things. So, that was another level of understanding. But what this manuscript opened up for me was yet again another level of understanding. Maybe I studied law in order to be able to write, or “not write” (and “not tell”) this story. That was the feeling I had towards the end of this manuscript.

When I first read James Walvin’s book *Black Ivory*, I remember being really shocked at the facts—the deliberate drowning of 150 people.⁶ I had thought I knew a lot about slavery, but the reference to the case, *Gregson v. Gilbert*, in his book, really surprised me. I decided I would go and look it up at the law library, and looking back now I have another level of understanding of the journey that one takes, to come to a particular point in time. I think, for instance, just the ease with which I decided I would go and look the case up at the law library—even knowing that there was a reported case—is directly linked to my studying law. On another level, the training in law teaches you to squeeze all of the emotion out of the events that comprise the case in question to get to the fact situation. And then you have, I suppose, this wonderful thing, the law, that is supposedly so constant and so unchanging and that at times is modulated by the principles of equity. Equity’s purpose was supposed to soften the hard, unyielding law. And so, as I am talking to you, what I’m understanding now is that my process reversed that—you take these hard facts, this desiccated fact situation of *Gregson v. Gilbert*—and you reintroduce those emotions and feelings that were removed. If you have something that is dried, when you put it in water, the water restores the dried fibers—and if you think about this, this two-page account of *Gregson v. Gilbert* that I found, squeezed out the lives that were at the heart of this case. It is ironic, isn’t it, to think that the very sea that took the lives of those Africans now performs the task of reconstituting those dried facts—the water in the ocean has filled this case with all of the bodies, all of the stories of those bodies that were squeezed out of this case to arrive at this two-page report. Which, by the way, doesn’t even say that it was wrong to end their lives. Absolutely nothing (apart from one comment in the case) is about murder, though murder it was. And that to me is what then really makes me question the law—for us, as African people—and our relationship with it. How do you/we relate to the law when it once said that we were things, and upheld all of these decisions that supported that view?

6. James Walvin, *Black Ivory: A History of British Slavery* (London: HarperCollins, 1992).

Think of the law today and what it is being used to do in terms of Guantanamo Bay? It's the same old story where all of these disciplines such as law and anthropology are being drafted into the service of a larger destructive force. In the short story "Whose Idea Was It Anyway?" I highlight the fact that the experience of slavery spawned anthropology and other sciences (like phrenology) that were drafted into service of proving the "inferiority" of black people, as well as the larger project of greed and a lust for power and wealth.⁷ So, the same set of questions and issues are presenting themselves to us across these historical periods. It [is] the same story that is telling itself, but through the different technologies and processes of that particular period.

PS: What is striking about the project is your insistence that you stay within the law and the legal document because so much of the dispossession for black people is precisely within this framework, this present and past history. Black subjects have always had to view the *Law* suspiciously because they were always already situated outside of the law (as property, nonhuman, chattel). But the paradox is that there is no "outside of the law," since it frames the social and political structures in which we exist in order to make sense of [the fact] that you have to explode it from inside, and connect it to its origins, its buried pasts.

NP: That is true. And it is within that dispossession within the law that we find our liberation, our freedom, our energy, by exploding it—from the inside. It's paradoxical. It really is profoundly paradoxical.

PS: Now I'm thinking as we're talking about this, too, in "Discourse on the Logic of Language," those edicts are legal discourse and language—the removal of the tongue and the way in which integrally the law and science and myth are all bound up with one another, all working in the service of this other thing.⁸

NP: Yes, and this "other thing" is essentially the erasure of Being. Towards the end of the essay I talk about this. I have always felt a bit discomforted by the whole notion of emancipation celebrations or "markings." While I think on the one hand that it is important to mark these events, on the other hand, when you deconstruct this type of activity and question what it is we are, in fact, commemorating you realize that it has more to do with Europeans finally

7. M. NourbeSe Philip, "Whose Idea Was It Anyway?" in Kofi Anyidoho, ed., *The Word Behind Bars and the Paradox of Exile* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997).

8. Philip, "Discourse on the Logic of Language," in *She Tries Her Tongue*, 56–59.

understanding and accepting what we, African people, knew all along, that we are first and last Beings, and that we cannot be turned into things? Hence, we will run, we will fight, we will kill, we will even kill our children rather than agree to be non-Beings? So, in a way we have always been outside of *that Law*, in a philosophical sense. We are still outside of the law today (and yet trapped by it) in the way the law is used to police and confine black bodies in the new prison industrial complex.

Archaeologies of Black Memory and the “Work of Mourning”

PS: That is a poignant connection. It reminds me of Saidiya Hartman’s assertion that the value of wrestling with the archive is about “illuminating the way in which our age is tethered” to those of the slaves buried in the archives in the “as-yet-incomplete project of freedom.”⁹ And drawing these connections is another way of engaging the archive differently, not necessarily to make meaning of slavery but to engage the meaning of our present moment. *Lose Your Mother* considers the problematic of encountering what you have just described as these “fact situations”—she says you have all of this history, all of this knowledge and what does it really amount to? In the presence of all of it you have nothing, no knowledge, and even less understanding. In these instances it’s as if we’ve run up against the limitations of our knowledge in a very real way. Once you meet that limitation, you have a few options. One is that you explode the facts, and that you also explode the archive, really pushing the boundaries of the disciplines, in academia, and certainly of the form of writing that will be used in this “not telling” you are both grappling with. There’s a sense, again, part of the discomfort readers will face, particularly those in history and even literary studies for that matter, is situating this form and its critical approach in relation to what has gone before it.

NP: I think what you’re saying goes directly to what I understand from the process of writing *Zong!* because it *is* about discomfort. It discomforted me as the writer and it puts us in that place of being uneasy. You cannot be comfortable reading the books that comprise *Zong!*: the content of the work is about death and death is always discomfoting, and in the face of that discomfort we mourn. Not only does the content discomfort, the form is discomfoting as well. In the accompanying essay, “Notanda,” I quote from Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, in which he talks of mourning, specters of the dead, and the need to know the exact place where the bodies and bones lie.¹⁰ There is a similar desire on my part for the bones; I want the bones.

9. Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 13–14, this volume.

10. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 9. Philip cites Derrida’s discussion about the “work

“Give me the bones,” I say to the silence that is so often what history presents to us. And again, because that space of memory and of the archive where you come up against their inherent limitations can become a space of craziness, the bones actually ground you.

PS: It’s the evidence of what transpired.

NP: When I think of *Zong!* nothing is very clear in the work. The images are fleeting; it’s almost as if you can’t pin them down, as if they’re ghosts. At the end of the acknowledgments I thank the ancestors for giving me the responsibility of bringing this story forward. Because it is a tremendous responsibility.

PS: Part of that responsibility is also about finding the form that begins to, I don’t want to say to *fill* that space, because it *captures* that space. I think the form offers a kind of justice. It’s a kind of redress, of acknowledgement, of commemoration, and I say commemoration in the sense of naming the dead. But we have no tombstones, for those aboard the *Zong*, their graveyard is the ocean.

NP: Exactly.

PS: There’s no marker. We don’t have the bones. We don’t have the tombstones. In fact, much of what we have, which is what I find fascinating about this engagement with the archive because what we have is their account (literally in terms of goods bought and sold) of these lives, but only insofar as they were counted as commodities, units of goods.

NP: And their archive—the archive of the owner and the lawmaker—is in fact the only marker. As I say in “Notanda,” the text, that is, the reported case, is like a gravestone, and in shattering that gravestone the voices are freed. The five-hundred-year enterprise that was the trans-Atlantic slave trade can be overwhelming, and one . . . [*pause*] I often wonder what the point of it was. Trying to find meaning in the world around us is, I believe, a basic human instinct, and so it’s natural to ask whether there was/is some meaning to this horrific experience. And I get to this place where I say: What if? What if the Ancestors intended some other purpose for us to have been brought to this part of the world, entirely apart from the European lust for profit. It seems to me that just asking that question puts us in a different position

of mourning” and the necessity of knowing who the deceased are, where the graves are, and that “the body or bodies *remain there—in situ*” (*Zong!*, 20).

and releases a tremendous amount of energy. In honoring our own dead, as I said before, by focusing on ourselves and what the experience of slavery has meant and can't mean, even just embracing all that, somehow helps to contain the experience so that we can benefit from the memory rather than being crushed by it.

PS: It also seems to me that there is a convergence of critical dialogue about this kind of engagement with the archive in African diaspora studies. I am thinking, for example, about Saidiya Hartman's and Verene Shepherd's presentations at the "Archaeologies of Black Memory" symposium.¹¹ It seems to me that each of you is wrestling with that "angel of history" that Benjamin refers to, and asking difficult questions that may not be answered and that, frankly, cannot be answered about the horror and terror of slavery. What strikes me about all of your approaches is that at one level, they stem from a general distrust of the "fact" of the artifact in the archive. One comes away with a host of difficult questions after the symposium presentations: what if we thought about not taking the dead bodies and making them signify, making them symbols, but actually honoring the dead, which is a different thing. It's one thing to say that you're going to remember the dead, but if your memory is aimed at producing knowledge about the slave trade, that also strips away the psychic and emotional implications of these tortured bodies that we have grown so accustomed to reading about and seeing pictures of. We know it, but we haven't connected ourselves to it in a psychic or ontological sense. So I feel like the work that you all are doing now is about asking, How have we become so comfortable in our knowledge and our comprehension of slavery? What does it mean to comprehend such a horrific experience?

NP: I think we've been using the master's tools (to use Audre Lorde's powerful metaphor) to dismantle the structures that hold us fast and that what is happening, as I said yesterday, is that we are beginning to fashion new tools to do the work, because the work cannot be done successfully using the master's tools. The master's tools were developed for us out of the master's relationship with us. And, as a result, they always hold within their very form and function the content of our denial, so when I take the legal text and say, alright let's play with this now, let's really play with this, let's see what this text gives up and gives us, it seems to me that that process makes room for something—anything—else to happen. It seems to me that what that approach suggests is that I don't trust the archive, that the archive is much more unstable than

11. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts"; Verene Shepherd's presentation was entitled "The Monument as Public Archive: The Jamaica National Heritage Trust's 'War Memorial Project' and the Archaeology of Black Memory." See <http://cls.miami.edu/smallaxe.html> for video of the symposium presentations (accessed December 18, 2007).

we originally thought. It's complex because we need language, we need grammar, we need all of those things, but we also need to use them in a different way—to make them ours in a different way. There's something I think that, as you say, is shared by Saidiya's work and mine. It's as if we're moving towards an understanding that there's a built-in limit to how much those tools, including the archive, have helped us to this point. And this limit requires new approaches to engage the task at hand, to tell the stories of our time. While I believe that this project—these projects—are particular to this time, I feel that we are coming back to the same story—that is trying to tell itself—by “untelling”; the same questions, but with different resources, different understandings, building on those who have posed these questions before.

PS: So would you say then that your other works were also part of the journey to arrive at this particular point in time, this particular project? How did you know this was the time for this project, and not, say, any one of the others you have in mind to do?

NP: I don't think I could have written this book ten years ago. I think that *She Tries Her Tongue* and *Looking for Livingstone* were definitely a part of this in the sense of working through language and working through silence. They were integral to getting to a place in “Ferrum,” the last book in *Zong!*, where I can risk destroying language. Because that is what it felt to me at times, as if I were writing a sort of code and that within the text were encoded these images related to the horrific experience on board the *Zong*. And in writing that code there was the sense that I was really fucking with the language at its most intricate level. It was as if I was finally getting my revenge on something that had fucked me over for so long, that I felt that this broken, stumbling thing that “Ferrum” is, is my very own language. For the first time in my writing life, I felt, this is my language—the grunts, moans, utterances, pauses, sounds, and silences. I feel that now in a powerful sense.

Finding the Form That Can/Will Bear the Burden

July 12, '02

The only reason we have a record is because of insurance—a record of property criteria for selection:

-verbs

-nouns, adjectives

-random selection that parallels the random selection of Africans

-it is in the text—the challenge, it leaps out

-the Africans are in the text

July 12, '02

Some—all of the poems—need a great deal of space around them—as if there is too much cramping around them, as if they need to breathe . . .

—M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*

PS: A few times in conversation you have stressed the need to tell this story, but telling it by *not telling*. How has the form of this poem provided you with a mechanism to tell this story differently, to tell it in a way that will do justice to the event and the experience?

NP: What I feel strongly is that we can't tell these stories in the traditional way, or the Western way of narrative—in terms of a beginning, a middle, and end. I think part of the challenge, certainly for me, was to find a form that could bear this “not telling.” I think this is what *Zong!* is attempting: to find a form to bear this story which can't be told, which must be told, but through not telling.

PS: There is such a clear sense, through the visual gaps on the page, that there are silences in the processes of this telling. I have always been struck by your work because of the consciousness that emerges due to what is not there, the blank space on the page. There are silences in the text, that are visible, palpable even, and it seems to me that you have worked to situate this project in between these spaces. There are pieces that will not tell, will not render themselves knowable. There seems to be a prominent consciousness working against the desire to fill in the gaps—to let these words resurface how, where, and in their own form throughout the project. If I try to put myself in your shoes as a writer, this must have been at once liberating and yet utterly oppressive because you would have to be *so aware* and cautious not to impose your meaning, your narrative, your interpretation, but to give those voices that space. Did you feel the weight of that as you were working? Given the limitations of this text, this one page legal document, it seems as though it would be remarkably difficult to make space to be creative, to have the full measure of language to work with.

NP: I think you've said it quite well. The organizing principle, once I had found the form of the cluster, was a relational one. Each word or word cluster is in relation to each other, particularly on sequential lines, and, further, no word or word cluster can come directly below another cluster of words. Another way of looking at it is that each cluster of words is seeking the space or the silence above. And this creates a number of alternatives for meaning and reading. And there is a very fine balance between the text and the surrounding space. Of course all these approaches have bearing on the story that is not being told—the alternative meanings,

the search for space, and so on. Maybe it points to something about our experience, and the text becomes an aesthetic translation of the physical containment, the legal containment that marked our arrival in this part of the world. But there is always a search—a restless search perhaps?—for space among the words in the text, always a seeking out a space, as if the words are seeking space to breathe. What this organizing principle did mean, as I found out quite painfully when it came to computer issues, is that the text is fundamentally unstable. I wrote the original manuscript in Word Perfect, then the press said they wanted it in Microsoft Word. Now, I mentioned that I felt I was writing in code, but as you well know, when you move a document from Word Perfect into MS Word, it reformats the text, sometimes slightly, sometimes significantly. But the words on the page were already spatially organized and arranged and with every shift from one word processing program to another, because of the way it was written, the text would shift because of the organizing principle within the poem. Microsoft has its code, and Word Perfect has its code, but my code, so to speak, was as explained above—that each word or phrase is searching for the space above it. This doesn't apply to the first section "Os" but to the following parts: "Sal," "Ventus," "Ratio," and "Ferrum."

PS: In reading some of your journal entries in the manuscript, one begins to get a glimpse of the long process and struggles of bringing this project, that is so much about death, on the one hand, and honoring life, on the other, into existence. As I was reading the introduction I found myself mapping your movement from the untellable story, the story that must be told, the story that can't be told, to ultimately, the story that will tell itself. Does this shift reflect a movement in the project itself, its structure, or does it reflect a shift in your own consciousness about what it would take for this project to manifest itself through poetry?

NP: I think it's probably a bit of both. It's a shift in the project itself because when I first conceived of it, I was going to use the words of this legal text, as they exist in the report, to make the poem. That was very much the authorial vision that was driving and shaping the project. When I spoke to you a couple years ago I was still at that place. The next shift occurred when I decided to fragment the words and I think it is in that shift that it moves into the idea that the story must tell itself. The last part of that expression is through not telling. Because it's in that shift where I fragment the words when it appears to me that these little stories are surfacing in the text. It becomes clearer that I am not so much constructing those stories (although I am bringing a certain historical understanding to the work) as creating a space to let them come to light—and this occurred most often in the margins. It is as if in fragmenting the words, the stories locked in DNA of those words are released. But it is in their nonlinearity that the not telling comes into play because there is no narrative through line. There's also a lot of repetition

which I was uncomfortable with at first until I understood what was happening, because each time a phrase or word repeats itself, it is doing so in a different context. This is signaling (or signing) a troubling aspect of the legacy of slavery—the repetitions of those of us who have been victims—and sometimes perpetrators—made manifest in our continued need to go over the same material time and time again, trying to find answers, trying to come up with different understandings of what this experience has been all about. But always for me, having now done this work, with this realization that we can never tell the entire story, it can never be told.

(Not) Telling the Story That Must Be Told

I fight the desire to impose meaning on the words—it is so instinctive, this need to impose meaning: this is the generating impulse of, and towards, language, isn't it—to make and, therefore, to communicate meaning? How did they—the Africans on board the *Zong*—make meaning out of what was happening to them? What meaning did they make of it and how did they make it mean? This story that must be told; that can only be told by not telling.

—M. NourbeSe Philip, “Notanda,” *Zong!*

NP: One of the things I want to say is that it's very, very painful and moving to sit with you and talk about this, particularly at this time because I have *just* finished it. You know, I have lived with this for more than seven years. When I was reading the last book, “Ferrum,” I found myself crying because one of the characters that comes out of the text . . . there is a family Wale, Sade and their young child, Ade . . . [*long pause*]. You know, those of us on this side of the great divide, I think what we are trying to do is bridge that silence. We are trying to find the words to express what has happened. But there are no words, there is no language for it. The closest I came to it was in that last book, “Ferrum,” where language disintegrates and degrades into sounds expressing that which cannot be expressed. The whole idea of silence is a continuation of what I had begun in *Looking for Livingstone* where I was looking at silence and silencing, what the uppercase “Silence” means and what the lowercase “silence” signifies. So, in some ways this is a very natural progression from that work. I think we who have language—humans—find silence very difficult. We have this desire to fill the space of silence with sound. There is this belief that if we can only talk long enough, hard enough, strongly enough, and articulately enough, we will be able to express that silence. But I think the silence is that which can never be told, but which, because of who we are—that is, human—generates within us this longing to express the inexpressible.

I suppose this is what is so beautiful about us, and at the same time so frightening and frustrating. And as I said in the essay, and I believe this goes to the heart of the question you

asked me about the shift from the untellable to that which must be told through not telling. If I had set out to write this poem in the way I often write, that is to tell a story *about* the *Zong*, I wouldn't have done it in the way the work has constructed itself. For instance, one of the discernible voices in the text is that of a white European male voice, who is confronting his own actions and responsibility in this horrific event, and ordinarily I would never have been interested in that voice, and for good reason. So, many of our stories have fallen into the cracks of silence, so that those of us who come to writing feel the responsibility of needing to tell our stories: after all, we have heard enough of their stories, why do we need to hear more from them? And, at times I did feel like that about this voice in the text; I would think, "Shut the fuck up already, we've heard enough about and from you!"

PS: So why include this voice then? Did you feel you had to do so in order to maintain integrity in the telling? Or not telling?

NP: I had no choice in the matter if I wished to be faithful to the process of allowing the voices space to tell their own stories; this was what was surfacing in the text. I suppose I could have excised his voice, but I think that would not have been doing justice to what had to be told. When I did that reading in Miami, I was talking afterwards with a couple of the participants about how the work ends: this man—the European—takes his own life. The African man, Wale, asks him to write a letter to his wife, Sade, who, of course, has been separated from him along with their child, Ade; he then eats the letter and jumps overboard. Then the man himself—the European—also throws himself overboard. Paula Morgan and I shared this moment of bittersweet laughter because the truth of the matter is that for us—African people—and for the world as a whole, to survive, that person, not to mention the impulse and action he represents, has to die. Had I excised the voice, that death would not have happened. It's akin to the idea that Columbus must die—for the world to live, that spirit of conquest, destruction, and domination that Columbus represents has to die. That is what the manuscript is saying in the realization on the part of the European man that he cannot survive, and his acceptance that he too has to die. And it is in that death that we have an opening to some possibility of a more just kind of existence. Once I had acquiesced, once I submitted myself to the text, once I made that decision I could not say, "No, that voice can't be in there": it disturbed me profoundly, it stills does, but so it goes. There were things that came out of the text, phrases like "nig, nig, nog," and so on, that made me feel nauseous as they would surface. It was very distressing, but it was part of the story—I could flinch, but I could not turn away from it.

PS: As I hear you, and several other presenters at the symposium talk about the experience of working in the archive, working so closely with these documents, pictures, letters, accounts of these unthinkable acts, there is always a moment of reckoning with the physical and psychological toll of this kind of research and writing. I have heard from you, and other scholars working on similar kinds of materials, accounts of the deleterious effects of this kind of research. You have described it repeatedly as a visceral experience as you are engaging these questions, documents, and accounts. So one must wonder, must ask, why continue, why open yourself up to this kind of profound grief? What is the cost of the ticket (to borrow Baldwin's phrase) for battling with the past through these archives? You have said there were days where you said you were so tired, so utterly drained that you had to put the project down for days at a time before coming back to continue working on it later? Is there something there that keeps bringing you back, keeps you returning to expose yourself again and again to this history?

NP: One of the things I've found as I've worked on this project is that this is very old and yet very, very present with us. How do we make sense of living in a world where one percent of the people living in the United States, for instance, make as much as ninety percent of the rest of the population [combined]. So many of us, including African people, live lives of great privilege here in the West while our brothers and sisters on the African continent suffer abject poverty, war, famine, and the AIDS epidemic. What we are living with today is so horrific and in a way similar to what I am writing about. If one has any conscience or any desire for justice it is deeply discomfiting, disorienting and frustrating. One has to work to maintain hope—hope for change. And so much of what we're living with today is linked to that first experience in globalization where the currency of globalization was the black body. Black bodies could be taken anywhere in the world, at any point in time, *sans passport, sans visa*. That was the currency of globalization then and I don't think we have had a reckoning on that yet, and this is why we keep recycling and returning to these moments, to which we will continue to return until (if ever) and unless we come to some kind of reckoning.

PS: And how has the manuscript given you a means for this kind of reckoning?

NP: In terms of the manuscript itself, I think that is why it took so long. I made a reference to it in the essay—Granville Sharp, in his letter to the Lords of the Admiralty—seeks to have these people charged with murder for throwing the slaves overboard. He interests me because I've always been fascinated by what it takes for someone in the mainstream to go against the grain in such a profound way. Particularly when you consider what everyone else was doing—the wealth and prominence derived from sugar, in this case. I'm fascinated by Sharp's actions

because it meant flying in the face of king, country, and flag. But at every moment in history there are always a few people who say no, this is wrong, this is not right. In my own small way, I think this manuscript is my effort at continuing that kind of work—except in this case the work here is the work of remembering and mourning, of locating the bones and grieving. At a time when we are often told we need to forget and move on—that was then, this is now. The very act of remembering, then, and in a particular way can be an act of subversion and resistance.

But back to your question about returning to the work in spite of the trauma—in his letter to the Lords of Admiralty, he asks how many of the quote unquote cargo of African men, women and children) would have even understood the language being spoken to them, when they were being told to jump overboard. That was a moment when everything just stopped. I was in Tobago, I remember distinctly where I was—I put the manuscript down and went for a walk on the beach, and I don't think I picked it up for about three or four days after that. I just couldn't go beyond that. You asked that question we all ask ourselves: what might it have felt like? I had not even thought of the issue of language—that, of course, they wouldn't have understood when they were being told to jump! Maybe they would have seen people jumping overboard, but to actually understand the language? Maybe it was good that they didn't understand the language. Another moment was when I looked at the paid accounts books of the agents in Jamaica who on occasion traded with the Gregsons, the owners of the *Zong*. There were no names—the lists of slaves in the book were simply identified as “Negro man” or “Negro woman” at the top of the ledger followed by “ditto” all down the page, with the exception of one gloss, “meager,” allowed with reference to “negro girl”—“negro girl meager.” And just in that one word . . .

PS: When you encounter that word, you must wonder how it could begin to approach representing the entirety of this being, this young child? I mean what is this phrase supposed to imply about her significance, her value, her worth, her life?

NP: I halted when I saw the word, and I thought, there is a whole story in that word, “meager.” Where was her mother? Her father? Whom did she turn to when scared? So, there were always moments like that, but those were the two most startling for me in the writing of this book—a process that for the most part was very discomfoting.

PS: And yet in the midst of the discomfort there's a certain care involved in taking that pause to just stop, because you're in front of this whole big mass of history, and what impulse guides you to the one-page document or to linger and ponder about “one meager girl.” And even if

the word itself suggests she's so slight, she's not even worth putting on the book, the pause is itself a way of honoring her life, wouldn't you say?

NP: Very much so. Because I think it is totally subversive in the face of the kind of broad-brush brutalizing where people just get reduced to Negro man, Negro woman, and ditto, ditto, ditto. You pay attention to one, and it is such an amazing act—and one that spills over to all the other dittos—paying attention and taking care with just the one. Because that's all we can do is care one by one by one. And that's why it was so important for me to name these lost souls in the footnotes to the early poems.

In “Notanda” I describe being at a shrine in Ghana, and one of the elders saying that they knew that none of my ancestors were on board the *Zong* or else I would not be there. I had never thought about a personal connection, nor do I think it really matters, but I do recall being shocked at his comment—the possibility of a personal link. Of course, he didn't know that some people did survive, that they didn't throw the entire cargo overboard. But when I shared this interchange with my daughter later on, she countered: “Not if there was a child.” In other words, what if one of those who were drowned left a child on board?” And I thought, “Of course,” because a mother may have jumped and a child remained. Or a father may have jumped and a child remained. How quickly we forget the meager ones.

But as I talk about the book with you, I am aware that despite all we have said, it doesn't weigh me down, and that is interesting. There is this energy. We talk about the meager ones but I'm not feeling it as a weight, it's not pulling me down.

PS: Maybe this is the reward for going through the grief and the mourning. It's what awaits you on the other side.

NP: You know as you said that, it reminds me of a funeral I went to last year in Ghana, in Accra. When we arrived at the location of the funeral celebration we were offered seats on one side of the yard, across from an area with a covered awning where people sat in different groups, some dressed in black, some in red, some in black and white, and so on. We later found out that the people in red were co-workers of the deceased, those in black were family members, those in black and white from another group, and so on. At one end of the yard they played traditional Ghanaian music—beautiful haunting melodies. It was recorded but a woman sang over the recording. This alternated with music from the other end of the yard that was more contemporary and to which people danced and sang. Running the length of the yard separating us from the group under the awning was a drain that smelt very badly, so much so that many people held kerchiefs to their noses. But after a while it was as if the drain ceased

to exist. And what I became aware of as I sat there was what comes after death—there was so much life. Later as we were leaving we talked to this older lady and asked her about the singing and dancing and her response was simply: “We sing for death, we sing for birth. That’s what we do. We sing.” That was really remarkable. That story was a long way of saying that there’s something about what we talked about before that I’m feeling here as we talk about the meager ones, the dying and the dead. I don’t feel burdened by it; it no longer weighs me down. As I say in “Notanda,” *Zong!* is song—the song we have always sang, particularly when we were brought here to the land of untelling. I think that that’s the gift, isn’t it?—if we can get to that place of Song and Zong. It’s the reward for going through the grief. It’s the other side.

PS: So, finishing *Zong!* seems to have provided you with a way of honoring the ancestors in such a way that their presence becomes a sustaining force, rather than a weight that burdens.

NP: I have a sense that they are there, but they are light. It’s a light place. There was a time when the text felt like a load to me, for those three, four, five years where I felt I didn’t know what to do with it. I sent it to a number of people for advice editing and no one could really offer advice on what to do with it. Then I went to Ghana and came back, and it was so clear then, *let it float*. So, perhaps, this is what floating feels like. On the back of the Song that is Zong.